
JEMIMA

FROM INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF AUNT JEMIMA: THE NARRATIVE OF A MODERN-DAY BLACK WOMAN, WRITTEN BY HERSELF.

Sometime in the new millennium, a large Black woman got her first full-time academic job. The Chair of the department and the Dean of the college did not mention that the tenure track came with a nineteenth century headscarf.

Between 1933, when she was hired, and 1951, when she died, Anna Robinson portrayed Aunt Jemima for Quaker Oats. She was described as “a large, gregarious woman.” Over the years various other women portrayed the role.

Hers was the smallest office on the entire floor—but it did have a window, and she was the most junior faculty member, so she didn’t mind. What she did mind was the layers of thick, siltish dust on every surface, so she asked when the office would be cleaned, thinking it was a routine request. At first the secretaries told her “soon,” but a few weeks and a few requests later, they directed her to talk to the department chair. The young professor had begun to publicly joke and privately worry that her office wasn’t going to be cleaned at all. Sarah, a white woman who had been hired the year before, assured the black woman that that would not happen. “After all,” Sarah said, “my office is cleaned regularly without me even asking!”

In 1889 the Aunt Jemima “ready” pancake mix was first marketed; in 1890 the Aunt Jemima character was first marketed. The character was not based on a real person, but on another fictional character—one created by black-face performers.

In all, five verbal requests and two emails later, she received the following message from the Chair:

At this University the Provost likes to say that we do windows. Unfortunately, in your case, this is literal. If you want your office cleaned, you will have to do it yourself.

So the young professor came to the university one morning dressed in overalls, with a bandanna tied around her head, a bucket and a bottle of Pine Sol in one hand, and a pair of

yellow gloves in the other. She made sure everyone in the office saw her that day and knew why she was there. None of them commented, or seemed surprised or disturbed. Then she cleaned her office—but she didn’t do the windows. This is how, with ire but without irony, a modern Aunt Jemima was created.

Even after this incident, Aunt Jemima resisted her new role. She ignored other professors’ taunts—for instance, when she wore suits, her colleagues, some of whom wore t-shirts and jeans (not the fashionable kind) to teach, accused Aunt Jemima of trying to make them look bad. They also questioned why she so often wore bright colors. Then classes started.

In 1989 the product logo was “updated” by removing Aunt Jemima’s headscarf and portraying her with straightened hair and in pearls and a lace collar.

If you like teaching, as Aunt Jemima did, the students are the best part of the job. Of course, if you are a woman of color professor, then your job includes hours of informal and unrecognized student advising in addition to teaching, research, and university committee work. Having been mentored quite a bit herself, Aunt Jemima didn’t mind the extra work. By the second semester, word had gotten out that she was tough, but fair, and that she was also pretty friendly.

That was when a group of Moslem students came to her for help. A notoriously racist and xenophobic professor was marking down the grades of South Asian students and Moslem women who covered their hair. Aunt Jemima realized that, as an assistant professor, she had very little power in the situation. She suggested the students complain as a group to the administration, but they were afraid of reprisals. So she said she would ask a senior colleague for suggestions. Aunt Jemima approached a full professor known for his progressive politics and presented the situation as though it were hypothetical. The colleague interrupted her before she’d finished her second sentence. “Him?” the colleague shrugged. “Everyone knows he’s like that. But he’s old—just wait for him to retire.” “And what about the students?” Aunt Jemima asked. The colleague shrugged and repeated, “Just wait for him to retire.” Aunt Jemima again suggested to the students that they complain en masse to the Chair, the Dean, or another administrator. They said

they would think about it, but they didn't trust those other professors.

Black faculty must perform various roles within the academy that are not necessarily requested of their white colleagues. Besides being scholars, Black faculty are expected to [perform 'emotional labor' and] act as activists...

Around this time, Aunt Jemima's colleagues began to confuse her with another assistant professor, Eva. Eva, a Latina, was shorter than Aunt Jemima and had white skin (Aunt Jemima's was very dark). Aunt Jemima didn't mention the situation to Eva, but when Eva said people were "confusing" her with Aunt Jemima as well, they joked that it was because they were the best-dressed people in the department. They did not discuss the other two traits they had in common, that neither was white and that both had very long, impressive resumes.

Aunt Jemima tried to focus on the positive—and on her work. The requirements for tenure were unclear and inconsistent, but Aunt Jemima figured she'd be safe with a book. Still, with more than 70 students each semester, the informal advising, and the committee work, she wasn't getting much writing done. The Chair told her there was zero support for junior faculty and there was "no such thing" as course release (which Aunt Jemima later found out to be untrue). Taking pity on the crestfallen Aunt Jemima, the Chair told her that if she got an outside fellowship to work on her research, the school would be "happy" to let her take it.

So Aunt Jemima got a fellowship.

On the advice of colleagues at other institutions, she asked the Dean if the university would make up the difference between the fellowship's stipend and her regular salary. His response was that he "didn't see why" they should compensate her at all when she wouldn't be on campus. He added that her healthcare and other benefits would also be cancelled for the year. So, Aunt Jemima took a \$15,000 pay cut (not including the missing benefits).

While she was away, she worked on her book manuscript and secured several shorter publications. After all, she didn't want people to think she wasted her time off. Coming back to the university the next fall, Aunt Jemima decided she was going to start as if from the beginning. She would go back

with (almost) all of the excitement and optimism she had when she first got the job. She smiled at and found complements for everyone—this one's skirt, that one's haircut, another's tidy desk. Her colleagues, in return, welcomed her with comments such as "Do you remember where your office is?" and "No one really thought you were coming back." Aunt Jemima swallowed and smiled, thinking that a certain amount of hating was to be expected. She would win them over by smothering them with kindness and burying herself in work.

An Aunt Jemima is someone who can emotionally suckle multiple persons at once while enduring infinite abuse, all with no help and a large smile. Aunt Jemima does not complain, does not tend to her own needs (she does not realize she has her "own" needs), has no sexuality, does not get tired, and does not get sick. Aunt Jemima does not die; she is merely replaced by a similar looking and performing model, perhaps with a different hairstyle or clothing.

Aunt Jemima joined four departmental committees and one university committee. She also spent much of that semester preparing her annual review to the tabbed, highlighted, color-coordinated specifics laid out by the Dean. Before she submitted the binder, she took it to her official university mentor. Instead of looking through all the materials, he focused on her CV, asking Aunt Jemima how he could get his work published in the same journals.

A couple of weeks later, after the department's promotion committee had met, the mentor summoned Aunt Jemima to his office again. "This," he gestured to the three-inch binder filled with everything she'd done or published since coming to the university, "is too much. It will look suspicious. You need to take some of this stuff out." Aunt Jemima thanked him for his mentoring and made an appointment with the Chair, who confirmed that Aunt Jemima should remove some of her work from the file. She asked if every professor was receiving the same instructions. The Chair sighed. "Well, you know, _____ is at the same level as you, but he doesn't have as many publications. It just won't make him look good." She looked up and caught Aunt Jemima's I can't believe you're actually saying this expression and sighed again. "But I did them, I wrote them all," Aunt Jemima protested. "Look, you just don't need these publications" the Chair patiently explained. "And you know _____ is a single father..." she trailed off.

A real-live former slave, Nancy Green, signed a lifetime contract to become a living trademark as the first “Aunt Jemima” spokesperson.

Aunt Jemima realized she had to leave. She had a feeling some white man’s—any white man’s promotion and career would always be more important than hers. When she told the story to senior colleagues at other institutions, more than one said she should sue. But Aunt Jemima didn’t want to sue. She just wanted another job.

Six months later she had more than one offer—all paying more than and requiring less teaching than her current position. Still wanting to be a good citizen, Aunt Jemima asked for an exit interview with the Chair. That last meeting was much like the others. The Chair repeatedly interrupted the junior professor and insisted she had “misheard” the instructions regarding the promotion review. (Though she did not deny that Aunt Jemima had been told to remove materials from her file, nor that different professors received different instructions.) The Chair ended the meeting by adding how easy it is for women of color to get jobs these days.

Years before Aunt Jemima had swallowed her tongue, so she kept her sharp answers to herself.

Until now.

AUNT JEMIMA

SEE:

ALLEGORY

GRADING

JERUSALEM

So Eli left, went back to Jerusalem to see her mother and her half-brother Uri, who had been busy discovering his limbs and orifices, glaring at internet porn, and running away from home. Animal brother, halfway blood, she remembered his birth as if it had been a war or an election. She was fourteen that month, sleeping in a pile of bodies in Independence Park. At dawn she woke and rolled up her sleeping bag, washed her face in the water fountain, and walked five miles to Hadassah hospital. Standing in the

glaring room, rocking the pink new human, her mom a soft feeding tube in the bed with the look of *you are my nightmare* to Eli. Ami, her stepfather, caring so hard at her, with his one lung left from the Six Day War and his square coke bottle glasses, the ones she had spit at and he spit back, his glob slopping on her cheek. But really she had left because of M, because losing one home always means returning to the one you left before.

On the way back from the airport, she suddenly saw the Old City walls—loose, throbbing stones, a sun in the middle of each brick. A corridor of police barricades had been erected along the sidewalk in front of Damascus Gate and crowds milled through it, women carrying platters and bundles of goods on their heads, soldiers standing around, M-16’s dangling from their necks on long straps. The rifle butts hung to their knees. She remembered dancing long ago with a soldier in a cloudy Jerusalem disco, teasing him about the gun poking into her thigh.

“Stinking Arab,” Uri muttered. “What?” He flipped his palm up at an old Palestinian man in a kafia who stood at the crosswalk arguing with a soldier.

They sat together in the back seat.

“What’s your problem?” Eli said.

Uri’s lips clamped. His cheeks were pale and pimpled, pink mouth set in his jaw and he turned to her, face cracked in a wet smirk. “What do you think, they’re your friends?” he said.

“Listen,” her mother started from the front seat, “every day something happens here. Your cousin Shula’s in a wheelchair.”

“Don’t fight with your mother.” Ahmed had told her. It was two days before her flight. “It’s bad for your future. Too much politics! Not everything in life has to mean something. Sometimes it’s nothing. You let it go. It’s up here,” Ahmed’s finger tapped his right temple. “Everyone over there carries a meaning in his arms.” He held them out for effect, his forearms thick. A button-down shirt was tucked into his black pleated pants.

“I can’t even talk to my mother,” Eli said. “If she knew what my opinions were she’d probably have a stroke.”